

Security Bollywood Cinema's Securitization of Terrorism and Impacts on Indian Ontological Security

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Since the attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001, the issue of terrorism has become a major point of concern for governments, international organizations, and the public across the world. However, in India in particular, terrorism has occupied a top spot on the government's policy agenda and in the minds of Indians for decades more. Broadly defined, terrorism means the use or threat of violence by non-state actors to incite fear among a target audience to achieve a political advantage.¹ India has experienced no shortage of terrorist attacks on its soil since independence in 1947, including the Indian parliament attack in 2001, the 26/11 attacks in Mumbai in 2008, and the Pulwama attacks in 2019.² Given this extensive history, terrorism has become a highly publicized and securitized political issue.

An emerging domain through which this issue has become publicized and securitized throughout the country is Bollywood, the Hindi-language film industry based in Mumbai, Maharashtra. Especially since the 1980s, the industry has produced and released a number of films centered on terrorism, including retellings of historical attacks in India or stories of fictional ones.³ Some of the most well-known Bollywood movies on the subject include Mani Ratnam's *Dil Se* (1998), Vidhu Vinod Chopra's *Mission Kashmir* (2000), Anurag Kashyap's *Black Friday* (2004), and Karan Johar's *My Name is Khan* (2010), among others. These movies are interesting topics of study because, like other forms of popular culture, they have significant influence over society. They spread and reinforce certain themes and messages, as well as shape societal attitudes, perceptions, and behaviours.⁴ By using specific language, phrasing, and narrative structures, movies can also influence public perception of a specific issue as an existential threat to security.⁵ The influence of these movies over society is heightened by their geographic reach and accessibility. In addition to theatrical releases, many Bollywood movies are later made available to audiences on streaming platforms, like Netflix and Amazon Prime Video, meaning that these movies, and the ideas and perspectives they propagate,

¹ Richard Jackson, "The Study of Terrorism After 11 September 2001: Problems, Challenges, and Future Developments," *Political Studies Review* 7 (2009), 174.; Clelia Clini, "International terrorism? Indian popular cinema and the politics of terror," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 8, no. 3 (2015), 340.

² "India-Pakistan tensions: A brief history of conflict," *Al Jazeera*, May 9, 2025, <https://aje.io/b2lygj>.

³ Clini, "International terrorism?" 337.

⁴ Fariha Asif and Jagmohan Sangha, "Film as a Significant Factor in Fostering Peace and Justice in Society," *Journal of Political Sciences and Public Affairs* 9, no. 8 (2021), 2, 4.

⁵ Alberto Tagliapietra, "Media and Securitisation: The Influence on Perception," *Istituto Affari Internazionali* 21, no. 34 (2021), 1.

reach wider segments of the Indian population as well as non-resident Indians and members of the Indian diaspora. As terrorism continues to remain a popular subject of movie plots, and as movies remain a mainstream form of media consumed in India, it is worth investigating the question: what kinds of messages do such films promote, and in what ways do they influence public opinion on the issue?

This paper aims to answer that question by exploring the extent to and ways in which Bollywood securitizes terrorism in Indian politics. It starts by introducing the methodology and corpus of primary sources that will be used to explore the research question and extend the current scholarship. Then, the paper reviews common themes found within the extant literature on the topic and identifies key gaps requiring further exploration. Finally, this paper will consider the depictions of terrorism in four popular Bollywood movies: Aditya Dhar's *Uri: The Surgical Strike* (2019), Sashi Kiran Tikka's *Major* (2022), Siddharth Anand's *Fighter* (2024), and Sagar Ambre and Pushkar Ojha's *Yodha* (2024). Using securitization theory and the Copenhagen school of thought as its central analytical lenses, the paper will analyze how terrorism is securitized in these movies as well as hypothesize how these depictions negatively impact an Indian's sense of security. For the purposes of this paper, securitization is understood to mean the process through which a political actor uses rhetoric of an existential threat to transform a "normal" political issue into a security issue.⁶ The Copenhagen school of thought states that an issue becomes a matter of security through speech acts and discourse.⁷ Overall, as the number of terrorism-focused Bollywood movies grows, it becomes important to understand the role these productions play on transforming terrorism into a critical and urgent policy issue.

Securitization of Terrorism in Modern Bollywood Cinema

This paper seeks to extend the existing literature by bridging the gap between Bollywood cinematic portrayals of terrorism and the field of security studies, including developing collective understandings of how terrorism is securitized in more modern contexts and making inferences about the impact of these depictions on Indian ontological security. Ontological security refers to "the need to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time [...] to realize a sense of agency."⁸ Specifically, an individual's agency requires a stable cognitive environment — the individual can easily pursue their goals and ends when they know what to expect from the world. However, some forms of uncertainty or instability,

⁶ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, (Lynne Rienner, 1998), 24; 26; Alberto Tagliapietra, "Media and Securitisation: The Influence on Perception," *Istituto Affari Internazionali* 21, no. 34 (2021), 3, <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaip2134.pdf>.

⁷ Tagliapietra, "Media and Securitisation," 3.

⁸ Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma," *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 3 (2006), 342.

such as chaotic events, impact the individual's ability to exercise agency, and thus threaten the security of their identity.⁹ In this context, terrorist attacks and other violent events generate instability and chaos which impact the individual's agency and thus sense of identity security.

Through its analysis of four specific movies, this paper argues that, despite the different sub-genres of these movies, the Bollywood film industry effectively works to securitize terrorism and undermine the ontological security of the Indian viewer in similar ways. First, these movies amplify the micro (individual) level impacts of terrorist attacks which frame terrorism as a threat by disrupting the viewer's sense of stability. Second, these movies evoke nationalist sentiments to convey the notion that terrorism is an existential threat, not only to India's physical territory but to its national identity as well. Finally, these movies securitize terrorism by promoting discourses that suggest that retaliation, retribution, and other extraordinary responses are required to combat the threat.

This paper draws these conclusions by applying discourse and content analysis on cinematic elements such as dialogues, character developments, storylines, plot devices, visual imagery, and audio cues, to a corpus of four Bollywood movies with terrorism as the main storyline. These movies were selected for analysis based on certain criteria. First, these movies were all produced and released from 2018 onwards. This modern set of movies contrasts those most commonly discussed in the literature, which were typically released between the 1980s and early to mid-2000s. This timeframe allows for consideration of more contemporary perspectives on terrorism and its framing as a threat. Second, these movies were released by well-known production companies that all fall within the top 50 highest grossing production houses in India.¹⁰ These films were also made available on streaming platforms for global audiences, including Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and YouTube. This suggests that the portrayals and messages on terrorism promoted in these movies are widespread and seen by large, and international, populations, allowing for insights on what narratives appeal to and resonate most with these filmmakers and audiences. Finally, the movies analyzed in this paper belong to two distinct sub-categories of Bollywood movies. The first category, which includes Siddharth Anand's *Fighter* (2024) and Sagar Ambre and Pushkar Ojha's *Yodha* (2024), tell largely fictionalized stories of terrorist attacks and fit the mould of the traditional Bollywood masala movie, which is characterized by a blend of genres (most commonly action/thriller, comedy, and romance), musical interludes, and high-octane, larger-than-life action sequences. In contrast, the second category of movies, comprising of Aditya Dhar's *Uri: The Surgical Strike* (2019) and Sashi Kiran Tikka's *Major* (2022), are more biographical in nature. Though

⁹ Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics," 342.

¹⁰ "Top Grossers by Studios," *Bollywood Hungama*, accessed November 21, 2024, <https://www.bollywoodhungama.com/box-office-collections/bollywood-grossers-studios/>.

not without creative liberties, these movies depict real-life terrorist attacks in Indian history and stray from certain hallmarks of the Bollywood masala. Despite their differences, all four films are based on reality, reflecting stories of either a single terrorist attack or combining elements from multiple historical events into one narrative.

Literature Review

The current literature on the depiction of terrorism in Bollywood cinema is wide ranging and interdisciplinary, including works from scholars in the fields of media and cultural studies, international relations, popular culture and world politics, and cinema studies, among others. Consequently, a number of themes and observations about the portrayal of terrorist attacks in Bollywood movies and their impacts on society can be drawn from these diverse publications.

One prominent theme evident in the literature is that Bollywood's depictions of terrorism proliferate negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, and paranoia among viewers and the masses. Ranjani Mazumdar analyzes new urban cinematic techniques and technologies used in three movies focusing on terrorist events in Bombay (now known as Mumbai), arguing that these techniques deploy the aesthetics of surveillance, spread the notion that terrorists have overtaken the city, and evoke feelings of fear, anxiety, helplessness, and paranoia among viewers.¹¹ She further notes that a common fear in society is the fear of insecurity, and when people experience this feeling, they endlessly pursue protection and security.¹² Similarly, in his study of several classic Bollywood terrorism movies, Iqbal Shailo notes that these movies retell stories of terrorism to create narratives of danger and fear associated with these events in ways that last in the minds of audiences who experience these stories.¹³ Widespread experiences of these negative emotions can undermine certain societal attitudes, such as national identity and unity.

Another emerging theme that connects more closely to securitization theory and the overall field of security studies is the notion that Bollywood depictions of terrorism reinforce societal divides, especially those between Hindus and Muslims and India–Pakistan, through the “othering” of Muslim individuals. Clelia Clini finds that due to the renewed global interest in terrorism as a political issue following the events of 9/11, films and media have started spreading discourses on terrorism that include exaggerated stereotyping and belligerent hostility.¹⁴ This has resulted in the general conflation of fundamentalism with Islam and the

¹¹ Ranjani Mazumdar, “Terrorism, Conspiracy, and Surveillance in Bombay’s Urban Cinema,” *Social Research* 78, no. 1 (2011), 148.

¹² Mazumdar, “Terrorism, Conspiracy, and Surveillance,” 160.

¹³ Iqbal Shailo, “Bollywood in the Hollywood Era: Narratives of Ultra-nationalism, Terrorism, and Violence,” *Cinej Cinema Journal* 7, no. 2 (2019), 32, 43.

¹⁴ Clini, “International terrorism?” 338.

production of “orientalist fears” in society, especially in the West.¹⁵ Similarly, Sanjeev Kumar argues that Bollywood cinema actively engages in the politics of nationalism created by the right-wing neo-fundamentalist Hindutva movement, which strives for the recognition and acceptance of the culturally Hindu foundation of the Indian nation.¹⁶ One way this occurs is through the portrayal of Muslim stereotypes, like Muslim characters who always wear traditional attire, practice certain Islamic mannerisms, and strictly adhere to Islamic religious codes.¹⁷ For example, in Sooraj Barjatya’s *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!* (1994), two doctors are characterized by their religion rather than their profession. For example, they are shown to be wearing traditional Islamic attire even while working in the hospital, despite their religion having no bearing on the plot.¹⁸ Moreover, following an increase in terrorist activities in the Kashmir region, Bollywood movies began portraying the threat of the Muslim terrorists whose religious identities are often the main identifying features. The popularity of such movies that pit the “bad” Muslim against the “good” Hindu suggests the existence and perhaps acceptance of divisive ideas in Indian society.¹⁹ In general, these disparaging portrayals in Bollywood cinema contribute to a process of “othering” of Muslims, which makes this population more vulnerable to social exclusion and violence as well as reinforces Hindutva rhetoric that Muslims represent threats to the nation.

There is also a subset of studies in the literature arguing that Bollywood depicts terrorism in novel, more socially “constructive” ways – that is, in ways that question traditionally entrenched discourses on terrorism. In her detailed discourse analysis of Johar’s *My Name is Khan* (2010), Clini argues that this movie, unlike others, addresses the problematic nature and impacts of widespread narratives on the global war on terror and “new terrorism.”²⁰ She also argues that, unlike other movies, this movie questions the administrative and military response to situations of fear as well as the Indian government’s politics towards minorities.²¹ Claudia Richter makes a similar argument in her comparison between the depictions of terrorism in Bollywood and Hollywood.²² Specifically, while Hollywood terrorist movies tend to feed into fear mongering and war mongering, Bollywood refrains from this. Her analysis of Chopra’s *Mission Kashmir* (2000) shows that the filmmakers intentionally resisted the vilification and demonization of the Muslim terrorist, electing instead

¹⁵ Clini, “International terrorism?” 339.

¹⁶ Sanjeev Kumar, “Constructing the Nation’s Enemy Hindutva, Popular Culture and the Muslim ‘other’ in Bollywood Cinema,” *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2013), 458, 461.

¹⁷ Kumar, “Constructing the Nation’s Enemy Hindutva,” 459.

¹⁸ Kumar, “Constructing the Nation’s Enemy Hindutva,” 463.

¹⁹ Kumar, “Constructing the Nation’s Enemy Hindutva,” 465.

²⁰ Clini, “International terrorism?” 351.

²¹ Clini, “International terrorism?” 352.

²² Claudia Richter, “The Ethics of Coexistence: Bollywood’s Different Take on Terrorism,” *Cross Currents* 59, no. 4 (2009).

to emphasize individual human emotions and psychologies of the characters.²³ In addition, Richter notes that this movie promotes narratives of reconciliation and peaceful coexistence, which help strengthen societal unity.²⁴ The existence of these socially constructive cinematic narratives, in contrast to the negative narratives previously mentioned, suggest that there is no standardized way in which terrorism is depicted in movies. However, these portrayals are very rare among the many Bollywood movies covering terrorist attacks and non-state violence.

This review of the available literature reveals that the ways in which terrorism is depicted in Bollywood movies vary somewhat. Consequently, the impacts on individuals' sense of fear and safety, and overall perceptions of terrorism as threats to the society and the country are manifold. While there are immediately obvious connections to the general field of international relations found in the literature, the effects of cinematic depictions of terrorism in the field of security studies requires further exploration. This paper contributes to this discussion by evaluating narratives of terrorism found in Bollywood cinema specifically. This paper will now consider each means by which terrorism is securitized, and ontological security is undermined in greater detail, in turn.

Terrorism as Threat to Individuals

A primary way in which these Bollywood movies securitize terrorism is through the amplification of its micro-level impacts as a cinematic tool. That is, as opposed to emphasizing the higher-level impacts to communities or the entire country, such as mass casualties or widespread damage to infrastructure and institutions, these movies highlight the effects of terrorist attacks on individuals. To be sure, these movies do address the more meso- and macro-level impacts of terrorist events. However, considerable portions of screen time and attention is used to picturize personal losses suffered by the main characters, such as deaths of their loved ones and teammates. For example, in *Fighter*, Squadron Leader Bash, one of the main characters a part of the core Air Dragons Unit, is tortured and killed by the head terrorist after being captured by the enemy.²⁵ In *Yodha*, it was the nuclear scientist who was killed by the terrorists after they hijacked his flight. Though not a principal character in the movie, the nuclear scientist was still an important figure in the country and his death is of particular significance to the main character Arun, an army soldier, who failed at his job to protect the scientist.²⁶ By including these deaths as plotlines, and by showing the holes that these deaths leave in the lives of the main characters,

²³ Richter, "The Ethics of Coexistence," 486.

²⁴ Richter, "The Ethics of Coexistence," 497.

²⁵ *Fighter*, directed by Siddharth Anand (2024; Mumbai: Viacom 18 Studios and Marflix Pictures), Netflix.

²⁶ *Yodha*, directed by Sagar Ambre and Pushkar Ojha (2024; Mumbai: Amazon MGM Studios, Dharma Productions and Mentor Disciple Entertainment), Amazon Prime Video.

these movies evoke strong emotional responses from the audience. This is because, as the movies progress, audience members start to form attachments to the main characters, almost considering them to be people in their own lives. This phenomenon of viewers forming deep connections with fictional characters is common — as long as the movie provides sufficient insight into a character, viewers feel empathy and sympathy in ways that develop emotional attachment.²⁷ Thus, when the movie characters experience these losses, the audience feels as though they have experienced personal losses as well, which disrupts their stable cognitive environment. These losses also threaten audience members' ontological security by creating irrational fear and paranoia that their own family members could be hurt or killed by terrorism.

This phenomenon plays out in a much more heightened way in *Major*, which provides an account of almost the entire life and career of real-life soldier Major Sandeep Unnikrishnan, including his heroic actions during the 26/11 attacks in Mumbai. Given the biographical nature of the movie, the audience is able to understand and resonate with Major Sandeep at a deeper level, feeling like they truly know him. This emotional attachment worsens the disruptions to ontological security caused by the post-climax scene where Major Sandeep succumbs to his injuries after defeating the terrorists.²⁸ Thus, even the more realistic, historically true movies can evoke similar emotional responses to the fictionalized, masala productions.

This cinematic tool is likewise useful even in movies about terrorist attacks that are far removed from civilian spaces, like that documented in *Uri*. According to Jessica White, media coverage of terrorist attacks spread awareness of these events to a much wider audience than just those directly affected, which amplifies the attacks' social and psychological effects.²⁹ Dhar's *Uri* accomplishes this by spreading awareness of the attack on an Indian Army brigade headquarters in September 2016. However, the movie adds an element of personal loss — Major Karan, the brother-in-law of the main hero Major Vihaan, dies while responding to the attack.³⁰ While an average viewer may not have any knowledge or attachment to this specific army base, they are more likely to resonate with the familial relationships portrayed by these two characters. The filmmakers heighten the emotional response from viewers by leveraging other cinematic audiovisual cues. For example, the entire scene is backed by a melancholy soundtrack invoking

²⁷ Rachel Nuwer, "The psychology of character bonding: Why we feel a real connection to actors," *Motion Pictures Association*, July 15, 2013, <https://www.motionpictures.org/2013/07/the-psychology-of-character-bonding-why-we-feel-a-real-connection-to-actors/>.

²⁸ *Major*, directed by Sashi Kiran Tikka (2022; Mumbai: Sony Pictures International Productions, G. Mahesh Babu Entertainment and A+S Movies), Netflix.

²⁹ Jessica White, *Terrorism and the Mass Media* (Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, 2020), 29.

³⁰ *Uri: The Surgical Strike*, directed by Aditya Dhar (2019; Mumbai: RSVP Movies). YouTube.

sadness and a sense of discomfort. Major Vihaan's body language throughout this scene also conveys the true extent of the loss he feels. In response to Major Karan's daughter shouting the team mantra, the rest of the unit responds appropriately, completing the mantra with the bravado required. However, Major Vihaan shuts down becoming unable to utter a sound.³¹ So, by depicting the shattering of this relationship at the hands of terrorists as well as the subsequent grief that Major Karan's family suffers from, this movie disrupts the image of stability that individuals often associate with their family structures, further framing terrorism as threats to their ontological security.

Another means through which the amplification of the micro-level effects of terrorism undermines viewers' ontological security is the use of death notifications and funerals as recurring motifs that disrupt day-to-day routines. In the context of ontological security, routines are practices through which individuals confront anxiety and make the otherwise chaotic world more predictable and reassuring.³² In each of these movies, there are emotionally charged scenes that depict the moments when the daily routines of the movie characters are disrupted by notification of their loved ones' deaths. For example, both *Fighter* and *Yodha* depict the common routine of military families waiting at home expecting their loved ones to return from their military duties at any moment. However, in these scenes, instead of their loved ones on the other side of the doorway, the families see other military personnel carrying the footlockers of their loved ones containing their belongings, conveying the news of their deaths. By breaking these routines, these death notifications incite feelings of anxiety in the minds of the family members and friends, and by extension the viewers, which contributes to the securitization of terrorism as a threat to their ontological security.

The depiction of funeral and memorial scenes has a corresponding effect on the ontological security of viewers. Specifically, these scenes interrupt the sense of order an individual feels in their life by depicting the out-of-the-ordinary events of funeral rites, especially at great levels of detail. In *Major*, when Major Sandeep's body is returned to his parents and wife, his belongings are returned to his family, and he receives a gun salute.³³ Likewise, in *Uri*, when the soldiers killed in the attack are being honoured, Major Karan's wife and daughter receive a folded Indian flag.³⁴ These practices are consistent with traditional military memorial practices. These movies also contain disconcerting images of these families grieving in places of mourning while funeral proceedings take place, such as when

³¹ *Uri: The Surgical Strike*, directed by Aditya Dhar (2019; Mumbai: RSVP Movies). YouTube.

³² Brent J. Steele, "Welcome home! Routines, ontological security and the politics of US military reunion videos," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32, no. 3 (2019), 325.

³³ Tikka, *Major*.

³⁴ Dhar, *Uri: The Surgical Strike*.

Bash's body is being buried at the maqbara (Muslim cemetery)³⁵ or when Arun's father's body is being burned on the pyre.³⁶ Funerals are likely not part of the average viewer's daily routines that provide a sense of stability. Therefore, exposure to highly detailed accounts of funeral proceedings disturbs viewers' sense of stability and provokes anxiety. By associating these uncomfortable events with terrorist attacks, the audience is pushed to view terrorism as an existential threat to their physical lives and to their sense of ontological security, thus securitizing terrorism among the masses.

Terrorism as Threat to Indian Identity

A secondary way in which these Bollywood movies securitize terrorism is by evoking sentiments of Indian nationalism, which frame terrorism as an existential threat to the country's physical security and its collective identity. Themes of nationalism and the continuation of harmonious relationships with Hindus and other minorities across India have long been popular topics in the Bollywood film industry.³⁷ This is no different in the four films analyzed in this paper, which employ a number of discursive and cinematic elements to suggest the idea that terrorist groups present dangers to the Indian national imaginary and consciousness.

In these movies, this threat is clearly established at the outset of the stories when the terrorist groups and their motivations behind attacking India are revealed. Coincidentally, the antagonists in all four movies are jihadist groups trying to achieve the secession of Kashmir from India and its incorporation with Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (POK). Still, in the statements of their objectives, it is evident that these terrorist groups want to inflict more than just physical damage to India. For example, in *Fighter*, the head terrorist Azhar explains wanting to turn Indians against each other and indoctrinate Indians to support the fight for a free Kashmir.³⁸ This notion is even more evident in *Yodha*, where the terrorists explain their plan to crash the hijacked Indian plane into Pakistani buildings of significance, such as its national mosque, to suspend ongoing peace talks between both countries. In this case, the physical security threat is to Pakistani territory, yet the ontological threat is to India's national image and identity. In fact, Jalal, the mastermind behind the plan, mentions that India's honour is entirely in his hands.³⁹ This rhetoric suggests that the underlying targets of terrorist attacks are the nonphysical elements of national identity, including societal unity and integrity, and works to rally viewers behind the heroes' missions to protect what it means to be Indian.

The dialogues of the main characters also serve to elicit Indian nationalist sentiments. In the penultimate scene of the movie *Major*, in a

³⁵ Anand, *Fighter*.

³⁶ Ambre and Ojha, *Yodha*.

³⁷ Clini, "International terrorism?" 341.

³⁸ Anand, *Fighter*.

³⁹ Ambre and Ojha, *Yodha*.

speech at a function honouring his son, Major Sandeep's father says that his son looked death in the eyes and said, "You can take me, but not my country! My country will not bow down to enemies!"⁴⁰ This quote generates feelings of nationalism and patriotism by implying that the 26/11 terrorist attacks in Mumbai were attacks on the *entire* country perpetrated by enemies of the *entire* country, even though the targets were primarily locations of significance to the city and not necessarily considered national landmarks. In *Uri*, the hero Major Vihaan repeats the words "Jai Hind," which is a phrase commonly used among the Indian military and government meaning "long live India." The continued use of this phrase throughout the movie acts as a morale booster, not just for the soldiers on the surgical strike team but for the audience as well, generating feelings of patriotism and reinforcing a sense of national pride. The emotional effect of this phrase is amplified in the climax scene of *Fighter*, where Azhar taunts the hero, Squadron Leader Patty, with the phrase while they are face-to-face. As the tides turn in favour of Patty, he menacingly says that he will teach Azhar the meaning of the phrase, explaining that, among other things, "*Jai Hind* is the pride of every child in [his] country."⁴¹ Later, "Jai Hind" becomes the last thing Patty says to Azhar before the latter is killed.⁴² These dialogues reinforce a sense of national pride among viewers, and supports the notion that terrorism significantly threatens to Indian identity, allowing it to become securitized.

Aside from these explicit articulations of Indian nationalism, these filmmakers also employ more cinematic audiovisual cues. For example, there are innumerable instances throughout these movies where the "Tiranga" (the colloquial term for India's tri-coloured flag) is shown, either in flag form draped over the caskets of fallen soldiers in *Uri*, or in abstract forms like the smoke emitted from Arun's flares in the ending scene of *Yodha*. In *Major*, the song titled "Jana Gana Mana," that plays in the background of Major Sandeep's army training montage, shares its title and certain lyrics with India's national anthem.⁴³ Similarly, the anthem song of *Fighter* that plays during pivotal scenes borrows lyrics from "Vande Mataram," the country's national song.⁴⁴ In *Yodha*, the song that plays at the end of the movie and through the credits is titled "Tiranga," and its lyrics evoke imagery of the Indian flag flying highly and freely in the sky.⁴⁵ These cinematic elements further elicit sentiments of Indian pride and collective identity.

It is important to note that, while these films promote Indian nationalism and belligerent pro-India discourse, they do not engage in the harmful process of "othering" of Muslim populations. This contrasts the criticisms of some scholars that certain other Bollywood movies represent

⁴⁰ Tikka, *Major*.

⁴¹ Anand, *Fighter*.

⁴² Anand, *Fighter*.

⁴³ Tikka, *Major*.

⁴⁴ Anand, *Fighter*.

⁴⁵ Ambre and Ojha, *Yodha*.

Muslim populations in stereotypical negative ways that play into Hindutva ideologies.^{46,47} These filmmakers are careful not to conflate the terrorist threat with all Muslims and all Pakistanis, even though the terrorists are shown to be jihadist groups sometimes backed by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency. For instance, both *Uri* and *Fighter* include dialogues where characters explicitly mention that the enemy they are fighting against is the ISI-backed terrorist groups and not the general Pakistani population. Moreover, these movies include Muslim characters as part of the main team of heroes, as demonstrated by Bash, who is a core member of the team in *Fighter*. These considerations allow for the religiosity of the terrorist groups to remain an integral part of the historical contexts of the storylines without harmfully impacting societal perceptions towards Muslims, especially Indian Muslims.

In a similar vein, these films diverge slightly from the growing trend in recent years of Bollywood movies shifting from their apolitical nature to become increasingly pro-government. Some scholars have noted that in the past decade under Narendra Modi's leadership, the film industry has been "co-opted" by his right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party.⁴⁸ For example, around both the 2019 and 2024 general elections, a number of pro-Modi movies with inflammatory Islamophobic narratives were released across the industry.⁴⁹ In contrast, the movies analyzed in this paper avoid including any emotionally charged and otherwise divisive narratives targeted towards Muslim populations.

Overall, these movies elicit feelings of nationalist pride and patriotism that unite viewers against the terrorist groups. This framing portrays terrorism as being a significant threat to the continued existence of Indian collective identity, on top of being threats to the physical security of Indians and India's borders, allowing terrorism to become securitized into a critical issue.

Terrorism as Provocation for Revenge

Finally, these Bollywood movies securitize terrorism by promoting themes of revenge-seeking and retaliation against these attacks. Many early Bollywood movies on terrorism rely on the emotional contours of redemption and often narrate these attacks as crises of humanity.⁵⁰ Such discourses, along with the rhetoric that terrorism is an existential threat, legitimate the use of special measures that fall outside of ordinary political

⁴⁶ Clini, "International terrorism?" 342.

⁴⁷ Kumar, "Constructing the Nation's Enemy Hindutva," 458.

⁴⁸ Hannah Ellis-Petersen, "'Brazen propaganda': pro-Modi films flood Bollywood before India election," *The Guardian*, March 22, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2024/mar/22/brazen-propaganda-pro-modi-films-flood-bollywood-before-india-election>.

⁴⁹ Ellis-Petersen, "'Brazen propaganda.'"

⁵⁰ Mazumdar, "Terrorism, Conspiracy, and Surveillance," 148.

and decision-making procedures.⁵¹ The movies analyzed in this paper mirror these discourses through a number of dialogues and audiovisual cues.

First, these movies frame these terrorists as ruthless, immoral groups that commit heinous activities, contrasting them with the more morally sound team of heroes. For example, in *Major*, the terrorists are shown killing a blind man and his service dog, and the team commander later explains that unlike India's National Security Guard, which aims to protect civilians, these terrorists have just one principle, "to kill or be killed," which they have proved time and again.⁵² Likewise, in *Fighter*, after the news that a suicide bomber attacked the armed police convoy, Group Captain Rocky reiterates that the difference between the Indian air force and the terrorists is that the latter do not follow any protocols.⁵³ These dialogues work to maximize audience support for the team of heroes while trying to minimize any sympathy directed towards the terrorists.

The theme of personal loss discussed previously also serves as another means through which the heroes' desire to exact revenge by any means necessary is justified. In *Uri*, Major Vihaan voluntarily decides to leave his desk job, and consequently his grieving family members behind, to plan and lead the surgical strike mission as a way of getting justice for the death of his brother-in-law and fellow soldiers. He also plays into these emotions with the soldiers from the other regiments to which most of the martyred soldiers belonged to, rallying them for the mission by positioning it as a chance for them to avenge their fallen brothers. Specifically, he notes, "just like those coward terrorists brutally killed our unarmed brothers in their sleep, we will give them a befitting reply — a chance to behead them."⁵⁴ This sentiment is perfectly captured in a scene from *Fighter* where, during a National Security Advisory meeting, government officials agree that "if we want to teach [the enemy] a lesson, we have to speak their language [...] Sometimes the only way to get justice is through revenge."⁵⁵ These contrasts between the morality of the terrorists and the heroes appeal to the emotions and morals of the audience, helping to justify the heroes' actions through the need for revenge to be exacted.

In addition to the characterization of terrorists as inherently evil, these movies also justify the use of extraordinary measures by depicting the insufficiency of current protocols and procedures. Specifically, across all four movies, government procedures and existing security measures are shown to have failed in preventing the attacks from happening in the first place, from stopping the attacks before they escalated in severity, and from preventing future attacks. As White notes, media depictions of terrorist attacks often frame the events in certain ways to spread the belief that

⁵¹ Tagliapietra, "Media and Securitisation," 2.

⁵² Tikka, *Major*.

⁵³ Anand, *Fighter*.

⁵⁴ Dhar, *Uri: The Surgical Strike*, 59:50-1:00:15.

⁵⁵ Anand, *Fighter*.

things are out of control.⁵⁶ For example, in *Fighter*, ineffective security measures enabled the suicide bomber's vehicle to easily infiltrate the convoy of trucks carrying Indian army soldiers.⁵⁷ In *Yodha*, the government's commitment to negotiating with the terrorists as opposed to using a tactical military response, and the corresponding inefficient bureaucratic processes, led to the successful hijack at the beginning of the movie.⁵⁸ These depictions create a sense of anxiety among audience members that current security measures are unable to stop the threat of terrorism.

This, then, sets the stage for these political actors' arguments that greater government intervention and the use of extreme tactics, such as retaliatory or even pre-emptive military operations, are needed to defeat the terrorists. Notably, these plotlines differ from Richter's observations of earlier Bollywood movies which exhibit more willingness to contribute to peaceful coexistences of human society, by promoting reconciliatory narratives.⁵⁹ Instead, these movies reflect the phenomenon that Clini observed in Indian politics following the 26/11 attacks in Mumbai, whereby the nation was securitized, civil liberties were suspended, and the roles of victims and perpetrators of the attacks were "exchanged."⁶⁰ For example, during a pivotal scene in *Uri*, when debating between potential responses to the attack, the political and military officials decide to carry out a surgical strike to eradicate all terrorist launchpads along the Line of Control.⁶¹ This decision, they claim, is a significant departure from India's traditional responses of waiting before striking another country, but is required to prevent the terrorists from continuing their attacks.⁶² Similarly, during the climax scene of *Yodha*, Arun comes face-to-face with Jalal, who mentions that arresting and imprisoning him will do little to stop the terrorists' war for Kashmir. As a result, instead of following the due course of law, Arun triggers an explosive device killing Jalal, to prevent his terrorist outfit from attacking again.⁶³ These examples illustrate how these Bollywood movies promote the subversion of standard processes of justice, by framing terrorists as deserving of revenge, allowing terrorism to become a critical security issue.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that, notwithstanding the diverse sub-genres and range of thematic and cinematic components, the Bollywood film industry effectively securitizes terrorism in Indian politics in similar ways. First,

⁵⁶ White, *Terrorism and the Mass Media*, 29.

⁵⁷ Anand, *Fighter*.

⁵⁸ Ambre and Ojha, *Yodha*.

⁵⁹ Richter, "The Ethics of Coexistence," 497.

⁶⁰ Clini, "International terrorism?" 348.

⁶¹ Dhar, *Uri: The Surgical Strike*.

⁶² Dhar, *Uri: The Surgical Strike*.

⁶³ Ambre and Ojha, *Yodha*.

these movies undermine the ontological security of the viewer by emphasizing the micro-level impacts of terrorism which disrupt viewers' sense of stability. Further, these movies orient terrorism as an existential threat to Indian national identity by including nationalist and patriotic discourses. Finally, these movies portray terrorism as an evil force that necessitates vengeance, which legitimates the use of tactics and processes outside of normal politics. Overall, under the lens of securitization theory, the cinematic techniques and discursive elements included in these movies make Indian viewers more susceptible to political speech acts that position terrorism as a critical threat to the country.

Understanding the impacts of these movies in India is useful for scholars and political decision-makers alike. Former prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru was quoted saying that "the influence in India of films is greater than newspapers and books combined,"⁶⁴ suggesting that the narratives and discourses propagated by these movies can significantly shape the perceptions and attitudes of Indians towards certain subjects. Given the rising number of Bollywood movies about terrorism that are becoming widely popular across the country and the rest of the world, understanding the influence these productions may have on Indian society and politics, especially in the realm of security, becomes important. Films will continue to remain a mainstream form of popular culture, and as more and more people have access to and consume films, discussions and analysis on their impact to society must continue.

⁶⁴ Asif and Sangha, "Film as a Significant Factor in Fostering Peace and Justice in Society," 1.

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